



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi  
Remarks As Prepared For Delivery  
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Good morning. How's everybody doing? I hope you are all enjoying your time in the nation's capital.

I have to confess that the early hour makes me a little nervous. I recently gave the commencement address at my youngest son's high school graduation and was horrified to look out into the audience and see him nodding off to sleep. I know you guys were selected to attend this conference because you are talented and highly motivated. But I hope you're also extremely well-rested!

So, welcome to the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. When you pause to think about all the historic debates that have taken place in this chamber over the years—arguments about war and peace, health care, and the economy—it's pretty electrifying. When I first came here, I had to pinch myself. I also remember thinking that it looked a lot bigger on television.

As you know, my name is Pedro Pierluisi, and I represent the four million U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico here in Congress. This morning, I want to share with you some of my experiences and to answer any questions you have about the work we do here.

To give you a little background, I was elected to Congress in November 2008 and took office in January 2009. I am thus referred to as a “freshman.” You see, in many ways, Congress is not so different from high school. Unlike high school, thankfully, longer-serving Members for the most part don’t subject newer Members to physical or emotional abuse. At the same time—*like* high school—this is a place where power and influence tend to increase with seniority.

As I mentioned, I was elected by the people of Puerto Rico. Now, by a show of hands, how many of you knew before today that Puerto Rico had an elected representative in Congress? Be honest. You’d be surprised how many letters I get each year addressed to “Your Excellency,” based on the assumption that I am Puerto Rico’s ambassador to the United States! It’s a pretty cool title, I must admit, but not an accurate one.

On a more serious note, one of my goals during my tenure in Congress is to educate people about Puerto Rico and the nature of its relationship with the United States. Puerto Rico—along with the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands—is a territory of the United States. Puerto Rico was ceded by Spain to the U.S. at the close of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Federal law governs life in Puerto Rico and the Island’s residents were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917. Men and women from Puerto Rico have fought in every military conflict the United States has waged since that time, and a number of our soldiers have earned the Medal of Honor. Back in February, I traveled to Afghanistan—and had the privilege to meet several soldiers from Puerto Rico who are risking their lives to fight violent extremism

and to bring freedom to the Afghan people. It is hard to put into words what an emotional and humbling experience that was for me.

Yet, at the same time, Puerto Rico is treated differently than the states under many federal programs, and we do not have the same representation in the federal government. My constituents cannot vote for the president, send only one representative to the House—yours truly—and have no representation in the Senate. And I have only limited voting rights, which I am happy to explain during the Q&A session.

As much as I love talking about Puerto Rico, I imagine you want to hear about how Congress works more generally, and I will address that now. But I hope this short discussion has given you a better understanding of Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States. Now I expect you to return home, invite all your friends over to your house, and share the wisdom I have just imparted to you!

When I was your age—about 400 years ago—I learned that Congress makes the laws, the Executive Branch enforces the laws, and the Judiciary interprets the laws. That is essentially correct—the primary role of Congress is to pass laws that govern our nation. I came to Congress with many ideas for how to improve our nation's laws, and I spend a good deal of my time crafting legislation. Introducing a bill is only a first step—I must then work to get my bill approved. If its just me—one Member out of 441—supporting my bill, then the chances of it becoming law are slim-to-none.

To improve those odds, I gather support for my bill from other Members and perhaps from respected organizations that are knowledgeable about the issue that my bill addresses. If other Members think my bill is sensible, they may cosponsor it, which puts them on the record in support of my legislation. It's a painstaking process to gather support—my staff and I will have dozens of conversations and send hundreds of e-mails trying to persuade others to back the bills I have introduced. But it is only fitting that, to make a change to federal law that may impact the lives of hundreds of millions of Americans, a Member needs to gather support from a wide range of his colleagues.

Once I have obtained a decent amount of support, I must then formulate a strategy to move my bill forward. First, I may ask the committee with jurisdiction over my bill to hold a hearing, where experts can testify and members of the committee can pose questions to these witnesses. A hearing is not a precondition to passing legislation, but it can draw attention to a problem in current law and help explain why the bill is a prudent solution to that problem.

Following the hearing, I will likely urge the committee to hold what is known as a mark-up, where committee members have a chance to offer amendments to the bill. If my bill is approved by the committee—meaning a majority of its members vote in favor—then I need to craft a strategy to persuade the full House to pass the bill. Passing legislation on its own—as a stand-alone bill—is very difficult, but not impossible. One of my primary bills this Congress—to give the people of Puerto Rico a fair vote on their future political status—*did* pass the House as a stand-alone bill, but that involved an enormous effort.

Another option for passing a bill is to attach it to another larger piece of legislation that will be coming to the House floor. When a bill is under consideration by the full House, it may be subject to amendments. If I can offer my bill as an amendment to this larger bill—or, even better, to convince the drafter of the larger bill to include my bill as part of that larger bill before it hits the floor—then I can be fairly confident that my bill will pass. You should note that thousands of bills are introduced in Congress every year. Very few are the subject of a hearing or markup, even fewer are passed by one chamber, and even *fewer* become law. Most are introduced and, like an unwatered flower, simply wither and die.

When the House votes on a bill, Members take an ID that is issued to each of us and insert it into a device on the back of some of the chairs on this floor. Then we push a button to vote yes, no, or present. When Members are on the floor, the Democrats sit on the left side of the chamber, and the Republicans sit on the right side, when facing the Speaker's chair.

Once a bill passes the House, it must also pass the Senate before it can go to the President to be signed into law. The Senate is quite a different animal than the House, with its own set of rules and practices. It often takes a significant amount of effort to persuade the Senate to approve a bill that passed the House but, under the Constitution, it's a step that cannot be avoided.

I want to emphasize that introducing, debating, and passing bills is an important part of my job, but it is only one part. A second critical duty I have is to serve as an intermediary between the people of Puerto Rico and the federal government. Frequently, I communicate with the President, his cabinet secretaries and other high-ranking federal officials to urge them to enforce

federal law and policies in a way that treats Puerto Rico equitably. In many respects, I serve as Puerto Rico's chief advocate before the federal government.

I have spoken for a while and want to make sure that you all have time to ask questions, so I will stop now. Please feel free to ask me about anything I have just said or about any topic that I did not cover.